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## Durham County considers partner benefits

*Encouraged by the City of Durham's recent approval of domestic partner benefits, county employees approach Commission*

by Claudia Assis  
reprint permission . *The Herald-Sun*

DURHAM — A group of Durham County employees is pushing for domestic-partner benefits similar to those now offered by the city government.

In the city government, unmarried heterosexual and homosexual partners who live with and share expenses with city employees are eligible for city health and dental coverage.

"I don't know whether it is feasible or not," said County Manager Mike Ruffin. "We are trying to determine what are the issues with this kind of request."

But for some county employees the issue is a matter of fairness and showing respect for all employees.

"The timing is right," said Nancy Blood, a county employee for nearly 25 years.

About 10 county employees have been lobbying for it for some time, but with the city of Durham's recent decision to grant domestic-partner benefits, the issue became hotter, according to Blood.

"The main focus is the disparity between practice and policy," she said. Both Durham county's personnel ordinance and its compensation policy do not discriminate against sexual orientation — referred by both as 'a preference of affection.' Not offering benefits could be a way to discriminate against gay and lesbian employees," she said.

Jennifer Sosensky, a county employee for almost 12 years said the county should be doing everything in its power to offer health benefits to as many of its citizens, said Jennifer Sosensky, a county employee for almost 12 years.

The County Commissioners haven't requested a formal review from the legal department, County Attorney Chuck Kitchen said, but since the issue has been floating around he has given it some thought. "There are all kinds of different issues that come up with domestic partnership provisions," he said.

Considerations would need to include: the scope of the policy, or who could be covered. Another is how to establish the employee has a domestic partner as opposed to a roommate without insurance, Kitchen said.

And the issue could be more complicated than simply saying that if the Durham city employees have it, Durham County employees should have it too, he said. Historically, cities have been legally allowed to do more things than counties, which have more constraints from the state, Kitchen said. The county employees have already contacted Commissioner Ellen Reckhow, they said.

"At this point, I want to get that feedback on how this would fit into our benefits package and any legal issues," Reckhow said. "It will be addressed, I can assure you of that." According to Diane Juffras, an Institute of Government's lawyer specializing in human resources legislation, there is nothing in the state law

## Rapid-result HIV Test gets OK

*Break-through makes testing easier, results almost immediate; saliva testing is next step*

WASHINGTON, DC — Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson announced the Food and Drug Administration's approval of a new HIV status test with results in 20 minutes, instead of two weeks.

Healthcare professionals and GLBT groups believe the rapid-results test will increase the number of people who are tested and subsequently seek appropriate treatments. The test will be a huge asset in hard-to-reach communities including young gay and bisexual men and communities of color.

The FDA estimates 8000 HIV-infected individuals a year do not receive the results of their HIV test and consequently do not receive treatment.

### The rapid-result HIV test

The new *OraQuick* test will be administered by health workers who take a small blood sample from a subject's finger, put it in a vial with a developing solution and then dip in a testing stick. A single red line on the stick means no HIV; two red lines indicate the person may have HIV and should be retested.

### Oral version urged by FDA

A version of the test that uses saliva instead of blood has yet to be approved.

The test is easy enough for social workers to administer; but for now, only health

workers are authorized because the manufacturer, OraSure Technologies Inc. has not yet applied for the necessary federal approval. According to the Associated Press, Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson has urged OraSure to take that step so the test can be more widely available.

Redge Norton of the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, welcomed the test's approval. "We believe that by removing testing barriers — and studies show that time is a barrier to some — people learn their serostatus, make informed health and treatment decisions and can prevent further transmission."

### Testing and counseling

Shana Krochmal, of San Francisco's Stop AIDS Project, agreed *OraQuick* will be an important tool but cautioned that knowing one's HIV status is just part of the picture.

"Any form of testing needs to be paired with solid, pre- and post-test counseling that helps people stay safe and healthy by keeping them up-to-date about safer sex and resources for treatment education," she said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that more than 200,000 people in the United States are infected with HIV but don't know it.

OraSure will ship its products within the next 30 - 60 days.

info: Consumer Inquiries: 888-INFO-FDA  
OraSure, Inc. www.orasure.com



## Share-A-Bear with the children

The Share-A-Bear campaign covering North and South Carolina is in full swing. No hibernatin' here! Collection places across the Carolinas are waiting for you to drop off a brand new cuddly, furry teddy bear just in time for Christmas.

The first campaign raised and distributed over 200 teddy bears. Last year they delivered 3690.

In 1994 James Martin came up with the idea of collecting bears through the Carolina Bear Lodge.

The Share-A-Bear Foundation is a children's charity based in North Carolina, but provides teddy bears to children touched by HIV/AIDS and life-threatening diseases in both North and South Carolina.

Give a new teddy bear today, this one's spoken for.

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Gaston County Share-A-Bear  
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